

Evolution of Women's Wrestling in India: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Support

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of women's wrestling in India, tracing its transformation from a traditionally male-dominated practice to a dynamic and increasingly inclusive sport. It analyses historical developments, participation trends, regional patterns, and the socio-cultural context that has shaped women's entry into wrestling. The paper highlights how states such as Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and parts of the North-East have emerged as key hubs due to stronger grassroots systems, community traditions, and state-level incentives. Despite progress, women wrestlers continue to face significant challenges, including socio-cultural barriers, financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, and limitations in institutional governance. The study further evaluates policy frameworks, such as the Khelo India Programme and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), as well as state-supported initiatives that have strengthened talent identification, coaching, and athlete welfare. It highlights the increasing importance of professional coaching, sports science, and gender-sensitive support systems in fostering future development. The paper concludes that while significant gains have been made, advancing women's wrestling in India requires continued reforms in safety, equity, institutional transparency, and access for rural and underprivileged girls. Strengthening these foundations is crucial for establishing a robust and inclusive ecosystem that fosters long-term excellence in women's wrestling.

Keywords— Athlete Welfare, Akharas, Women's Wrestling, Olympic Medal.

I. INTRODUCTION

Wrestling is one of the oldest known sports in the Indian subcontinent, deeply intertwined with mythology, physical culture, and rural social life, and predates its modern codification under colonial and Olympic regimes. Ancient Sanskrit texts and epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* describe heroic wrestlers like Bhima, Jarasandha and Hanuman, and refer to *malla-yuddha* (combat wrestling) as both a form of martial training and a test of moral strength, suggesting that wrestling was already institutionalised by the early historic period as both a game and a warcraft (Shekhar & Kumar, 2019). Over time, more playful or sport-oriented forms known as *malla-krida* evolved alongside the battlefield style, and by the medieval period South Asian wrestling was organised in *akhara* (wrestling gymnasias) where boys and young men lived under a guru in a highly disciplined environment combining rigorous physical training, celibacy, religious ritual and a distinctive diet heavy in milk, ghee and almonds (Shekhar & Kumar, 2019). In the

Mughal period, the indigenous *malla-yuddha* blended with Persian–Central Asian traditions (*varzesh-e bastani*) to produce *pehlwani* or *kushti*, which became the dominant style in north India; wrestlers trained and competed in specially prepared earth pits, used body-weight exercises like *dand* (push-ups) and *baithak* (squats), and treated wrestling less as a pastime than as a complete way of life. British colonialism introduced Western notions of organised sport and, later, freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling on mats, but even as Indian wrestlers began entering national and international competitions, the rural *dangal* (local wrestling fair) and the *akhara* remained central institutions for socialisation, masculine discipline and patronage by landlords, princes and religious establishments (Salve, 2020; Shekhar & Kumar, 2019). Modern Indian wrestling thus grew on a dual foundation: a centuries-old vernacular culture steeped in religion and caste hierarchies, and a 20th-century sporting pathway tied to national prestige. After Independence, legendary *Pehlwan* such as the Great Gama and Dara Singh symbolised physical strength and national pride, while

K.D. Jadhav's bronze medal at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics became independent India's first individual Olympic medal, establishing wrestling as a rare arena where Indians could match global powers (Salve, 2020). For decades thereafter, however, Indian success remained sporadic until the late 20th and early 21st century, when states like Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh invested heavily in wrestling hostels and *akhara* networks; this, combined with employment incentives in the Railways and other public sector institutions, produced a new generation of international-level wrestlers. Salve's survey of Indian wrestling notes that by the early 2000s India had consistently begun winning titles at Commonwealth and world events, and that the "roots run deep" in rural north India, where kushti is one of the most popular traditional sports. At the Olympic level, this resurgence is visible in the cluster of freestyle medals won by Sushil Kumar (bronze 2008, silver 2012), Yogeshwar Dutt (bronze 2012), and later Ravi Kumar Dahiya (silver) and Bajrang Punia (bronze) at Tokyo 2020, so that by August 2021 Bajrang's bronze was celebrated as India's seventh Olympic medal in wrestling. At the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010, India won 19 wrestling medals—including 10 golds—out of 21 participants, underlining the sport's transformation into a major medal-producing discipline. Yet, for most of this long history, wrestling was defined as an almost exclusively male preserve: *akhara* culture tied ideals of spiritual discipline, celibacy and physical prowess to "ideal masculinity," and women as well as lower castes were largely excluded from these "male-sacred" spaces (Yadav, 2020). Drawing on ethnographic work in north Indian *akhara* communities, Yadav shows how notions of purity, pollution and *brahmacharya* (celibacy) produced wrestling gymnasia as homosocial institutions in which male power and respectability were affirmed through control over the body and sexuality; kushti is described as "a way of life that symbolises masculinity at its best," and female bodies were viewed as a distraction that could undermine wrestlers' discipline and self-control. In Haryana, where virtually every village is said to have an *akhara* even when educational facilities are lacking, wrestling has been heavily patronised by the state and local elites, yet girls were long discouraged from playing sports, and particularly from entering the *akhara* for kushti training; families feared social condemnation if daughters wrestled in loincloth-style gear or performed in public arenas (Yadav, 2020). Under such conditions, the emergence of women's wrestling in India in the late 20th century was nothing short of a social rupture. Yadav notes that it was only in the mid-1990s that Indian authorities formally introduced women's wrestling, and even then, largely

under pressure from the Asian Wrestling Federation, which warned that India would not be allowed to send men to junior championships unless it also fielded women. Many male wrestlers and coaches strongly opposed this change; when a Haryana coach allowed girls to train with boys in 2002, critics derisively claimed he was letting "goats stay among lions," a metaphor that cast girls as weak interlopers in a masculine domain (Yadav, 2020). Despite such hostility, a pioneering cohort of women—many from conservative rural backgrounds—began to occupy mat space in *akhara* and sports hostels, challenging the gendered visual economy of sport and the idea that muscularity and aggression belonged naturally to men. The breakthrough on the international stage came at the Delhi 2010 Commonwealth Games: Geeta Phogat won India's first ever gold medal in women's wrestling (55 kg freestyle), followed closely by Alka Tomar and Anita Sheoran, who also claimed gold in their respective categories, helping India to dominate the wrestling medal table. These victories were symbolically powerful because they unfolded on home soil, in front of a national television audience, and signalled that Indian women could not only participate in but also excel in a sport long coded as hyper-masculine. Khel-journalist Salve (2020) observes that alongside Sakshi Malik's later Olympic bronze, Geeta's Commonwealth success marked the point at which female wrestlers began to be widely recognised as national icons rather than curiosities within a male sport. The story of the Phogat sisters from Balali village in Haryana—Geeta, Babita and their cousins trained by Mahavir Singh Phogat—came to epitomise this shift: their careers, later popularised in biographies and film, demonstrated how a patriarchal rural society could be compelled, through international medals, to recalibrate its notions of honour and appropriate femininity. The next decisive moment in the emergence of women's wrestling was Sakshi Malik's bronze in the 58 kg freestyle category at the Rio 2016 Olympics, which ended India's medal drought at those Games and made her the country's first woman wrestler to stand on an Olympic podium (Times of India, 2016; Indian Express, 2016). Reports from the time stressed both the historic nature of the achievement and the fact that she came from Rohtak district in Haryana, a state notorious for a skewed sex ratio but also celebrated for its wrestlers; Sakshi herself linked her success to prolonged struggles over training facilities, social acceptance and financial support, arguing that the money being showered on her after Rio would have been more meaningful had even a small percentage earlier been invested in grassroots infrastructure (Indian Express, 2016). By 2021, the cumulative effect of these breakthroughs was visible in both performance and participation: women wrestlers were

regular members of Indian contingents at World Championships, Asian Games and the Olympics, and India's overall Olympic wrestling tally—with Bajrang Punia's bronze at Tokyo 2020 hailed as the country's seventh Olympic medal in the sport—included one women's medal that was repeatedly highlighted as a pioneering milestone (India Today, 2021). At the same time, sociological research reminds us that these achievements coexist with persistent inequalities: even as female wrestlers from Haryana and other states have "turned gender equations upside down" by entering the *akhara* and international arenas, they continue to face accusations of being "unfeminine," community resistance to training in shorts or *kachcha*, and double burdens of domestic labour and sporting excellence (Yadav, 2020). Thus, the contemporary landscape of wrestling in India is one of striking contrasts and continuities: an ancient sport whose roots in *malla-yuddha* and *pehlwani* still shape everyday training practices and moral codes; a modern competitive discipline that has become one of India's most reliable sources of medals at the Commonwealth and Olympic levels; and, increasingly, a contested space where women's bodies and aspirations are redefining what counts as strength, respectability and national pride.

II. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S WRESTLING IN INDIA

i. Traditional Akhara Culture and Gender Restrictions

The historical roots of Indian wrestling lie in the *akhara*, a traditional mud-pit training centre that evolved into a deeply ritualised masculine institution structured around celibacy, purity norms, caste hierarchies, and guru–chela discipline (Alter, 1992; Shekhar & Kumar, 2019). Indian wrestling, celebrated in ancient texts and village *dangals*, valorised the male body as an embodiment of strength and moral virtue. Consequently, *akharas* became exclusive male spaces where women were prohibited from entering, training, or even being present near the sacred wrestling pit, reflecting broader patriarchal controls over women's mobility and public presence (Yadav, 2020). Studies from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh emphasise that for much of the twentieth century, girls were discouraged from outdoor sports due to rigid honour codes, low female literacy, and severe gender discrimination (Kakkar, 2014). Wrestling attire, such as the *langot* and the close physical contact required in bouts, were considered incompatible with "proper femininity," reinforcing the exclusion of women from the sport (Salve, 2020). Thus, before the late 20th century, the cultural and institutional foundations of Indian

wrestling were overwhelmingly male-dominated, leaving little space for women's participation.

ii. Early Pioneers and Milestones

Despite these entrenched restrictions, some early pioneers challenged gender norms. The most prominent among them was Hamida Banu, popularly remembered as India's first woman wrestler, who competed against male wrestlers in public *dangals* during the 1930s and 1940s, defying *purdah* norms and patriarchal expectations (Banu, n.d.). In the post-Independence period, legendary freestyle wrestler Chandgi Ram (Hind Kesari) became a central figure in promoting women's wrestling. In the late 1990s, he trained his daughters and other girls in his own *akhara* despite significant social backlash, including boycotts by conservative villagers. His efforts aligned with global developments, particularly the introduction of women's wrestling at the Asian Wrestling Championships in 1996 and later the Olympics in 2004, which created institutional momentum for India to field women wrestlers (Saha, 2018). These pioneers created foundational cracks in the rigid, gendered structure of Indian wrestling, symbolically opening the doors to broader female participation.

iii. Growth Post-1990s and Post-2000 Reforms

The real transformation in women's wrestling began in the 1990s and 2000s, driven by multiple socio-economic reforms and shifting cultural attitudes. Economic liberalisation, increased rural mobility, and improved sports infrastructure, facilitated through Sports Authority of India (SAI) hostels, created new opportunities for girls, particularly in Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh—regions with strong wrestling traditions (Kakkar, 2014). Government incentives, such as assured jobs in the Railways and state police services for medal winners, encouraged families to view sports as a viable career option for their daughters. The breakthrough example was Mahavir Singh Phogat, who trained his daughters and nieces—Geeta, Babita, Ritu, and others—in the village of Balali, Haryana. Their rise from local mud pits to national and international podiums challenged patriarchal norms and demonstrated a model of rural female empowerment (Phogat Sisters, n.d.). By the late 2010s, journalists recorded the presence of dozens of women-only *akharas* in Haryana, indicating a major cultural shift in what was once an exclusively male institution (Daav Pech Dames, 2019; Saha, 2018). This era laid the institutional and cultural groundwork for women to enter—and succeed in—elite wrestling.

iv. Impact of International Achievements (Commonwealth, Asian Games, Olympics)

International achievements played the most crucial role in legitimising women's wrestling in India. The decisive

breakthrough came during the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games, where Geeta Phogat won India's first-ever women's wrestling gold. Her victory, followed by medals from Alka Tomar and Anita Sheoran, marked women's entry into India's mainstream wrestling narrative (Geeta Phogat, n.d.; The Quint, 2018). Geeta further became the first Indian woman wrestler to qualify for the Olympics (London, 2012), reinforcing the sport's global significance for Indian women. Another major milestone was Navjot Kaur's gold at the 2018 Asian Wrestling Championships, the first by an Indian woman at that event—an achievement reflecting the growing depth of women's wrestling (Saha, 2018). The most iconic moment, however, was Sakshi Malik's bronze medal at the Rio 2016 Olympics, making her the first Indian woman wrestler to win an Olympic medal and ending India's medal drought at the Games (Times of India, 2016). Her win triggered a surge in female enrolment in akharas and inspired a nationwide shift in perceptions about women's capabilities in combat sports. Together, these achievements placed women's wrestling at the centre of India's medal-winning strategy and solidified its role as a platform for gender empowerment.

Review of Literature

Singh and Chahal (2018). Highlight Scholarly work on gender and sport in Haryana, which underscores how entrenched patriarchal norms shape the opportunities available to young women in disciplines such as wrestling. Examining women athletes in Haryana, researchers argue that early sport socialisation is heavily influenced by parental attitudes, community surveillance, and gendered expectations surrounding modesty and behaviour. Their research demonstrates that despite growing visibility of elite women wrestlers, everyday participation remains restricted due to fears of reputational damage and concerns about the physicality of contact sports. Similarly, Singh (2017) notes that female athletes often confront dual burdens—domestic responsibilities and competitive training—which limit their ability to commit fully to sport. These studies situate women's wrestling within a broader socio-cultural field, showing that even when structural opportunities expand, gender regimes rooted in family honour, body-control norms and patriarchal surveillance continue to shape who can access wrestling and how far they can progress.

Khan (2019), analyse how media coverage constructs women wrestlers as symbols of empowerment, often masking persistent inequalities. in a critical discourse analysis of sports media, argues that portrayals of elite wrestlers like Geeta Phogat and Sakshi Malik emphasise individual determination and nationalist pride, but rarely

acknowledge structural constraints such as caste privilege, unequal access to facilities, or gendered restrictions in rural areas. Similarly, Kumar and Anand (2020) find that Indian newspapers framed women wrestlers during the Rio Olympics as embodiments of “new Indian womanhood,” celebrating their success while downplaying the socio-economic struggles many face. These studies highlight a tension between representation and reality: while media narratives help normalise women's participation in wrestling, they also risk simplifying or depoliticising deeper issues of patriarchy, access, and inequality. Thus, media scholarship complicates overly celebratory narratives surrounding female participation in combat sports.

Sharma (2016) argues that schemes such as Khelo India, residential sports hostels, and sports quota recruitment have significantly increased opportunities for female athletes, particularly in northern states. However, she notes that infrastructural gaps—such as inadequate training facilities for girls, safety concerns, and a limited number of female coaching staff—continue to shape participation unevenly. Complementing this, Singh and Hooda (2020) analyse Haryana's sports policy and conclude that incentives, such as cash rewards and government jobs for medal winners, have encouraged families to support their daughters' entry into wrestling. However, these benefits disproportionately reach those already linked to established akharas. These policy-oriented studies demonstrate that institutional frameworks are crucial in enabling women's participation; however, their success depends on addressing persistent barriers related to gender, safety, and resource allocation.

Significance of This Study

Studying the emergence and growth of women's wrestling in India is significant for several reasons:

1. *Cultural and Historical Continuity vs Change:* Wrestling is deeply rooted in Indian history (from Malla-yuddha to Pehlwani). Documenting how a gender-exclusive tradition evolves to include women tells a broader story of cultural transformation.
2. *Gender Equity and Social Change:* The increasing acceptance of women wrestlers challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. It signals a changing societal attitude toward women's agency, body, strength, and public visibility.
3. *Sporting Development and Talent Diversification:* Including women in wrestling expands the pool of talent, improves competitiveness, and broadens the sport's reach — especially among young girls

from various socio-economic and regional backgrounds.

4. *Policy and Institutional Reflection:* Understanding how institutional support, coaching, infrastructure, and sports governance adapted (or resisted) to include women reveals strengths and gaps. This can inform future policy, funding, and development strategies.
5. *Inspirational and Role-model Impact:* Women wrestlers who succeed internationally become symbols of empowerment. Their stories motivate new generations and help break stereotypes about “appropriate” roles for women in society.

Objectives: -

- i. To identify major trends in participation, performance, and regional growth.
- ii. To analyse the historical evolution of women’s wrestling in India.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary-data-based qualitative research design to analyse the evolution, challenges, and policy support for women’s wrestling in India. Data were collected from peer-reviewed research papers, government reports of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, publications of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), policy documents such as the Khelo India schemes, and reports from state sports departments, particularly those of Haryana and India. Additional secondary sources included books, media archives, national survey data, and reputable digital repositories (e.g., Google Scholar, JSTOR). Content analysis was employed to identify historical trends, socio-cultural themes, participation patterns, and the impact of policy interventions. A comparative analysis was employed to examine regional variations and changes over time periods. This method enabled the study to synthesise extensive existing knowledge, evaluate policy effectiveness, and highlight gaps requiring further primary research, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of women’s wrestling in India.

Socio-Cultural Transformation and Changing Perceptions in Women’s Wrestling in India

i. Breaking Gender Stereotypes

The rise of women’s wrestling in India represents one of the most significant shifts in the country’s gender norms, especially in regions historically defined by patriarchal power structures. Wrestling, traditionally viewed as a hyper-masculine sport rooted in strength, aggression, and bodily discipline, long excluded women from

participation. Yet, the entry of female wrestlers in the late 20th and early 21st century disrupted these rigid constructions.

Women’s achievements—such as Geeta Phogat’s Commonwealth gold (2010), Sakshi Malik’s Olympic bronze (2016), and numerous Asian and world-level medals—challenged the entrenched belief that combat sports are “unsuitable” for women. Female wrestlers reconstructed public understandings of femininity, demonstrating that physical strength, assertiveness, and a competitive spirit are not exclusive to male traits. Their success also weakened stereotypes linking women to domestic labour, modesty, and bodily restraint. As a result, the female wrestler emerged as a symbol of empowerment, self-determination, and athletic excellence, inspiring a new generation of girls to pursue sports beyond socially prescribed boundaries.

ii. Role of Families, Communities, and Media - Families as Catalysts of Change

In many cases, socio-cultural transformation began within households. Families that allowed daughters to train—despite community criticism—played a decisive role in reshaping gender expectations. The Phogat family’s story exemplifies this shift: Mahavir Singh Phogat’s insistence on training his daughters in a male-dominated setting challenged entrenched village norms regarding girls’ clothing, physical training, and public visibility. With increasing state rewards—jobs, scholarships, and cash incentives—families began viewing daughters not as liabilities but as potential achievers who could bring prestige and financial stability.

- Communities as Negotiating Spaces

Although communities initially resisted women’s wrestling—criticising attire, training schedules, and public competition—they gradually transformed as female athletes began achieving national recognition. Villages that once prohibited girls from stepping into akharas now take pride in producing elite athletes. Community acceptance grew not only due to the medals but also because women wrestlers became role models, demonstrating discipline, dedication, and moral respectability, thereby countering earlier fears about the sport’s perceived impropriety.

- Media as a Powerful Shaper of Perception

Media narratives—documentaries, newspaper coverage, and films like *Dangal*—played a transformative role in framing female wrestlers as national icons. Media representation shifted public attitudes by celebrating women’s resilience, rural struggles, and sportsmanship. Coverage of Sakshi Malik’s Olympic medal, for instance, generated large-scale recognition and dramatically increased enrollment of girls in wrestling academies.

Social media further amplified these stories, enabling young women to claim public space and visibility that had previously been denied to them.

- *Influence of Haryana and North Indian Wrestling Culture*

Haryana—and the wider North Indian belt—served as the cradle of women's wrestling revolution. The region's long-standing wrestling tradition, rooted in the akhara culture of pahlwani, provided both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, the cultural valorisation of wrestling meant that physical strength and athletic prowess were deeply respected; on the other, akharas historically excluded women due to strict norms of masculinity, purity, and brahmacharya.

The transformation in Haryana occurred because rural wrestling culture already valued combat sport as a pathway to honour, employment, and social mobility. With state policies offering government jobs, stipends, and rewards, families in Haryana recalibrated their attitudes, recognising that daughters could also benefit from the wrestling ecosystem. The emergence of women-only akharas, increased institutional support, and a strong network of coaches accelerated this shift. Haryana's success became a model for other states, demonstrating how a traditionally conservative region could become India's leading hub of women's wrestling.

Participation Trends and Performance Patterns

i. *Rise in participation across states*

Since the early 2000s, women's wrestling in India has moved from a small cluster of athletes in a few north Indian states to a genuinely pan-Indian discipline. At the Asian Wrestling Championships, Indian women only began winning medals in 2001. However, by 2018, they had already collected 42 medals out of India's total 154 Asian medals, overtaking the entire Greco-Roman tally in less than two decades (Scroll.in, 2018). This reflects a sharp rise in the number and quality of female wrestlers graduating from state akharas and sports hostels across the country.

Multi-sport data also shows a broader base. At the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, Indian women wrestlers won three gold, two silver, and one bronze medal, matching the men's medal haul in wrestling and signalling that women were no longer marginal participants. The success of Geeta Phogat, Alka Tomar and Anita at CWG 2010, followed by multiple medals from Vinesh and Babita Phogat in later Games, helped normalise women's participation and inspired more girls to take up the sport.

ii. *Age-wise and grassroots-to-elite trends*

The competition pyramid for women's wrestling now spans sub-junior (U-15), youth (U-17), junior (U-20), U-23 and senior levels. The Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG) institutionalised age-group competition at the national level, with separate U-17 and U-21 categories intended to act as a talent pipeline for international sport. In KIYG 2021 (held in 2022), Haryana, Maharashtra and Karnataka topped the overall medal table, indicating strong state-level systems that feed both boys' and girls' wrestling.

Earlier, wrestlers such as Antim Panghal became the first Indian woman to win a U-20 world title in 2022, showing that the age-group system is now producing world-class talent (New Indian Express, 2022).

iii. *Regional distribution: Haryana, UP, Maharashtra, North-East*

Haryana remains the undisputed powerhouse. At the Tata Motors U-23 National Women's Wrestling Championship 2019, Haryana women won 6 of the 10 gold medals (50, 57, 65, 68, 72, 76 kg) and three bronzes, topping the team table with 205 points. Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra each secured one gold, with lower team scores (Delhi: 154 points, UP: 123 points) (Business Standard, 2019).

At the Khelo India Youth Games 2021, Haryana's grapplers "reigned supreme," boosting the state's overall medal tally to 45 medals (16 gold, 11 silver, 18 bronze) midway through the event and overtaking defending champions Maharashtra; Manipur from the North-East stood third overall with 14 medals (10 gold, three silver, one bronze) (Times of India, 2022). When the full Games medal table is considered, Haryana finished first with 52 gold, 39 silver, and 46 bronze (137 total), followed by Maharashtra (45–40–40) and Karnataka (22–17–28). Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Maharashtra consistently rank among the medal-winning states at age-group nationals and Khelo India, often producing champions in girls' freestyle categories.

The North-East, particularly Manipur, has emerged as a strong region in multi-sport youth events, with high medal counts in combat disciplines. In KIYG 2021, athletes from the North-East collectively secured 10 gold medals among 14 medals, underscoring the region's growing contribution to India's combat-sport culture (Times of India, 2022).

iv. *Performance in national and international events*

At the Asian Wrestling Championships, Indian women have become key medal contributors, winning 42 medals by 2018, with a pattern of securing four or more medals in four of the five editions before 2018 (Scroll.in, 2018). Navjot Kaur's gold at the 2018 Asian Championships

made her the first Indian woman to win an Asian title, breaking a significant barrier for women's wrestling.

In the Commonwealth Games, women's wrestling has produced multiple champions since 2010: Geeta Phogat

(2010), Babita Kumari (2014), and Vinesh Phogat (2014, 2018). Vinesh became the first Indian woman to win two gold medals in the Commonwealth Games wrestling.

Table 1: Indicators of participation and performance in Indian women's wrestling

Dimension	Event / Level	Key Statistic	Interpretation
Continental performance	Asian Wrestling Championships 2001–2018	42 medals won by Indian women out of 154 total Indian medals; women surpass Greco-Roman tally	Indicates a rapid rise of women's wrestling and sustained multi-medal performance at the Asian level.
Multi-sport breakthrough	Commonwealth Games 2010 (Delhi)	Indian women wrestlers: 3 gold, two silver, one bronze, matching men's wrestling tally	Shows the immediate high impact of women's wrestling being included at CWG.
Youth participation & state strength	Khelo India Youth Games (2021). (Haryana)	Overall medals – Haryana: 52G/39S/46B (137); Maharashtra: 45G/40S/40B (125); Karnataka: 22G/17S/28B (67)	Haryana, Maharashtra and Karnataka dominate youth sport, feeding large numbers of girls into wrestling and other disciplines.
National women's depth & regional spread	U-23 National Women's Wrestling C'ship 2019 (Shirdi)	Out of 10 women's gold medals, Haryana won 6, while Delhi, MP, UP and Maharashtra won one each; Haryana topped team points with 205 vs Delhi 154 and UP 123	Confirms Haryana's leadership but also shows meaningful contributions from UP, Maharashtra and Delhi.
North-East emergence	Khelo India Youth Games 2021	North-East / Manipur bloc: 14 medals (10 gold, three silver, one bronze), placing them third overall	It shows that the North-Eastern states, especially Manipur, are emerging as important contributors in combat and strength sports.

Infrastructure, Training Ecosystem, and Coaching Support in Women's Wrestling in India:

i. Akharas vs. Modern Wrestling Academies

The evolution of women's wrestling in India is deeply connected to the shift from traditional akharas to modern, scientifically equipped wrestling academies. Historically, akharas functioned as cultural and physical institutions rooted in Hindu philosophy, celibacy norms, and rigorous physical training. They relied on mud-pit wrestling, *dand-baithak*, and traditional strength-conditioning methods, but remained strictly male domains for generations, limiting women's access due to social taboos and gendered restrictions. As women began entering wrestling in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the traditional akhara could no longer fully support modern competitive needs. This led to the rise of modern wrestling academies, equipped with mats, weights, recovery rooms, and video-analysis facilities that align with Olympic freestyle standards. Supported by the Sports Authority of India (SAI), Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), and state governments, these academies—especially in Haryana, Delhi, Maharashtra, and Karnataka—now serve as high-

performance centres, offering structured training, exposure to national camps, and scientific conditioning regimes essential for elite competition.

ii. Availability of Female Coaches

A significant challenge in the expanding training ecosystem is the shortage of female wrestling coaches, which affects both participation and the comfort of athletes. Wrestling coaching in India remains dominated by men. Although many former champions, such as Geeta Phogat, Babita Phogat, and Sakshi Malik, are emerging as mentors, the number of certified female coaches is still limited. This creates barriers for young girls whose families may hesitate to send them to male-run akharas or academies due to privacy, cultural concerns, or social norms regarding physical training. The lack of female coaches also influences athlete development, as young wrestlers often benefit emotionally and psychologically from gender-sensitive mentorship. In response, SAI and the WFI have initiated women-specific coaching certifications, apprenticeship models, and leadership development programmes. While promising, these efforts have yet to fully bridge the gap, making the expansion of a

strong female-coach pipeline essential for long-term sustainability and inclusivity.

iii. *Access to Scientific Training, Nutrition, and Sports Science*

One of the most significant transformations in women's wrestling is the integration of sports science, nutrition, and injury-management frameworks into training. Modern academies now include sports physiotherapists, strength and conditioning specialists, nutritionists, and sports psychologists—resources that were practically absent two decades ago. Scientific training has enhanced the agility, endurance, and recovery capabilities of women wrestlers, enabling them to meet global standards. Proper nutrition plans ensure safe weight management, which is crucial in a weight-class sport where dehydration or overtraining can harm performance. Sports psychologists help athletes combat pressure, performance anxiety, and mental fatigue—issues especially prevalent among young women balancing societal expectations with competitive demands. Recovery science—such as physiotherapy, cryotherapy, and flexibility training—has reduced injury risks and improved competitive longevity. However, access to these resources remains uneven; elite training hubs in Haryana and metropolitan centres benefit the most, while rural akharas and smaller academies often lack such facilities due to financial and infrastructural limitations.

Challenges Faced by Women Wrestlers in India

i. *Socio-Cultural Barriers*

Women wrestlers in India grow up within a social context where wrestling is historically coded as a male, caste- and community-marked sport, especially in north Indian regions such as Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. Traditional *akhara* culture links wrestling to ideals of masculinity, celibacy, physical toughness and male honour, making it difficult for girls to claim space in these arenas (Oza, 2019). Studies of women's sport participation in India reveal that family opposition, concerns about “femininity,” and anxieties about dress, mobility, and reputation persist as significant constraints (Ahmad, 2015; Main et al., 2018). Reporting on Haryana's sportswomen highlights how daughters who enter wrestling challenge both patriarchal control and skewed sex ratios, often facing gossip, moral policing and pressure to prioritise marriage over sport (Dias, 2017; sportanddev.org, 2014). For many families, letting a girl travel with male coaches or stay in hostels is still seen as risky, so only those with unusually supportive parents or strong local role models (like the Phogat sisters) manage to break through. These socio-cultural barriers affect entry, continuity and performance of women wrestlers at every stage.

ii. *Financial Constraints*

Wrestling demands regular expenditures on a diet (especially protein-rich foods), equipment, travel, competition fees, and medical care. For many rural or lower-income households, these costs are prohibitive. General research on Indian women in sport indicates that women athletes often receive less financial support from both their families and institutions, which limits their ability to train consistently or reach higher competition levels (Ahmad, 2015; Main et al., 2018). Kohli (2017) shows that women athletes tend to receive lower stipends, fewer sponsorships and weaker award recognition compared to men, despite equal or better performance, reinforcing the perception that investing in daughters' sports is economically “unsafe.” For women wrestlers, who frequently come from agrarian or working-class families in Haryana and other northern states, balancing training with household labour and income-earning activities becomes a major struggle (Oza, 2019; Dias, 2017). This structural under-investment means many talented girls drop out before reaching national camps or international selection.

iii. *Inadequate Infrastructure and Safety Concerns*

Although some SAI centres and state academies provide mats, hostels and gyms, the broader infrastructure remains uneven. Ahmad (2015) notes that women's sport in India suffers from inadequate facilities, lack of changing rooms, and limited access to quality coaching and medical support, especially outside metropolitan areas. Main et al. (2018) similarly highlight gaps in basic infrastructure, equipment and sport-science support as key barriers to women's performance. For women wrestlers, these deficits are compounded by safety and privacy issues – many traditional akharas lack separate toilets, safe accommodation or female staff, discouraging parents from sending girls to train (sportanddev.org, 2014; Dias, 2017).

Official documents and legal analyses also indicate that sports institutions have only slowly begun to integrate safeguards against sexual harassment. The National Sports Development Code (2011) and subsequent government instructions directed federations and SAI centres to adopt policies and complaint mechanisms, but implementation has often been weak (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2013–14; Deshpandey & Manohar, 2016). Inadequate lighting, poor supervision, and the absence of robust internal complaints committees at some centres create an environment where women wrestlers may feel physically and emotionally unsafe, even when facilities exist on paper.

iv. *Lack of Exposure and Competition Opportunities*

A further challenge is unequal access to competition. While certain states, such as Haryana, Maharashtra, and

Delhi, have dense calendars of district and state-level tournaments, girls from less-resourced regions often have few opportunities to compete. General studies on women's sport in India observe that limited tournament opportunities, selection biases and poor information flow restrict women's exposure to high-quality competition and talent pathways (Main et al., 2018; Ahmad, 2015). Media and NGO reports on Haryana's women wrestlers underline that those who do succeed often rely on exceptional local support networks – visionary coaches, committed parents, or NGOs – rather than a uniform national system (sportanddev.org, 2014; Dias, 2017).

At the national level, a small group of academies and SAI centres tends to dominate selection for national camps, meaning that women who cannot relocate or afford long-term residential training are less visible to selectors (Oza, 2019). This concentration of opportunity reinforces regional inequalities: Haryana's women wrestlers have become globally competitive, but girls from many other states remain underrepresented in national teams despite potential talent.

v. *Issues of Harassment, Governance, and Institutional Gaps*

Perhaps the most serious challenges relate to harassment and weak governance. Legal and policy writings on Indian sport highlight that women athletes face multiple forms of abuse – verbal, psychological, and sexual – often perpetrated by coaches or officials who control selection, travel and funding (Kohli, 2017; Thakur, 2018). A 10-year record obtained by *The Indian Express* through RTI revealed that between roughly 2009 and 2019, the Sports Authority of India received 45 complaints of sexual harassment, of which 29 were against coaches, underlining the vulnerability of women and minor athletes within institutional settings (Indian Express, 2020). Parliamentary questions and government documents also acknowledge incidents of harassment in national camps, calling for stricter enforcement of guidelines and disciplinary measures (Lok Sabha, 2013; Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2013–14).

Scholars and legal commentators argue that gender-imbalanced leadership, opaque selection processes and the absence of independent oversight bodies perpetuate a culture of impunity in sports federations (Deshpandey & Manohar, 2016; Main et al., 2018). With very few women in decision-making positions, women wrestlers who experience abuse or discrimination may fear retaliation or career loss if they speak out. This governance deficit interacts with socio-cultural expectations of “silence” and family honour, making it extremely difficult for survivors to access justice. Thus, even as Indian women wrestlers

achieve international success, they continue to operate within institutional structures that are only partially reformed, where safety, fairness and accountability are not yet guaranteed.

Policy Framework and Government Support

i. *Khelo India Programme*

The Khelo India – National Programme for Development of Sports was revamped in 2017 to pursue twin objectives: mass participation and promotion of excellence, with specific components for women's sport and talent development. The Cabinet-approved scheme aims to strengthen the entire sports ecosystem through playfield development, community coaching, competition structures at school/university levels, women's sports, and talent identification and development, including support to sports academies and centres of excellence. A government booklet on Khelo India notes that special schemes were introduced “to empower women to make a mark in sports,” with financial grants, improved training facilities, and parity of prize money for marginalised groups.

For talent identification, Khelo India has a structured Talent Development Programme. In the first extensive selection list, 734 wrestlers were identified as Khelo India athletes, including 349 girls across multiple weight categories in women's wrestling, indicating a direct investment in a sizable women's pipeline. These athletes are then placed in accredited academies and National Centres of Excellence (NCOEs) under the SAI/Khelo India program, where they receive boarding, coaching, competition exposure, and sports-science support (SAI, 2021).

ii. *Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS)*

The Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) was established in July 2014 under the National Sports Development Fund to identify and develop potential Olympic and Paralympic medal prospects by providing them with personalised assistance for training, equipment, foreign exposure, and sports science (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2017). A 2018 Rajya Sabha reply shows that wrestling received over ₹1.37 crore from TOPS up to 2018, underlining the priority given to this sport.

Media reports from 2017 list several top wrestlers—Ritu Phogat, Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik—among athletes funded by TOPS, reflecting direct support to leading women wrestlers in Olympic weight categories. A 2017 academic article on Haryana's Olympic contribution also notes that Haryana and Punjab had *maximum representation* in TOPS, with prominent wrestlers such as the Phogat sisters and other combat-sport athletes

included, reinforcing the scheme's role in backing wrestlers from key "wrestling states."

iii. *Role of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI)*

The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) is the national governing body for the sport of wrestling. It is recognised as the official National Sports Federation (NSF) by the Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports. The government's list of recognised NSFs for 2020–21 explicitly includes WFI for wrestling. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports issued a 2019–20 renewal order, linking recognition to compliance with the National Sports Development Code, which emphasises governance norms, athlete welfare, and transparent selection processes.

Within this framework, WFI is responsible for organising national championships (sub-junior, junior, senior, and women's), affiliating state units, and recommending athletes for international competitions, national camps, TOPS, and Khelo India support. Its domestic calendar and selection trials effectively determine which women's wrestlers move from state akharas and academies into SAI camps, international tours, and major events, making the WFI a crucial institutional gatekeeper in the policy ecosystem (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2017).

iv. *State-Level Schemes: Haryana, UP, Railways and Services*

Haryana has one of the most generous sports incentive structures in India. The Haryana Sports and Physical Fitness Policy 2015 substantially enhanced cash awards for medal winners; revised amounts include ₹6 crore for an Olympic gold, ₹4 crore for silver and ₹2.5 crore for bronze, with similarly high rewards for Asian and Commonwealth Games. A 2019 Gazette notification further operationalised a Cash Award Scheme (effective from 1 April 2017), explicitly covering athletes who represent India while employed in central organisations, which is crucial for wrestlers who join Railways or Services teams. Separate 2019 orders extend cash awards to junior and sub-junior categories, strengthening incentives for young girls in wrestling.

Uttar Pradesh (UP) has also utilised high-value awards and job opportunities to attract athletes. In 2018, the state announced that Olympic medallists would receive ₹ six crore (gold), ₹4 crore (silver), and ₹2 crore (bronze), alongside cash awards for Asian and Commonwealth Games medal winners, and provisions for government employment. Such policies benefit women wrestlers emerging from UP's growing wrestling centres.

Central institutional employers, such as Indian Railways and the Services (Armed Forces), provide a parallel support structure. Railway Board circulars and master

circulars on recruitment and promotion under the sports quota, in place since the early 1990s and updated in 2013, reserve posts and out-of-turn promotions for outstanding sportspersons. Recruitment notices for 2017–18 explicitly list women's wrestling as an eligible discipline, signalling that women wrestlers, too, can gain secure salaried jobs through this route.

v. *Scholarship and Talent Identification Programmes*

Beyond cash awards and job opportunities, policy instruments include scholarships and structured talent identification programs. The NSDF and early TOPS documents describe scholarship-style support for elite prospects, particularly for the Olympic cycles of 2016 and 2020. Khelo India adds a strong grassroots layer: central guidelines emphasise talent identification and development, funding for accredited academies, and support for "Khelo India Athletes" across various sports, including wrestling.

The Khelo India Talent Development list, which shows 349 girls among 734 identified wrestlers, demonstrates that women feature significantly in these scholarship-style pipelines. Combined with state-level policies in Haryana and UP and employment pathways in Railways and Services, these schemes form a multi-layered support structure that has underpinned the rise of India's women wrestlers from grassroots to Olympic podiums.

IV. **FUTURE PROSPECTS AND STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS FOR WOMEN'S WRESTLING IN INDIA**

i. *Strengthening the Grassroots Pipeline*

The long-term growth of women's wrestling in India depends on systematically nurturing talent at the grassroots level, where the majority of potential athletes—particularly from rural and small-town regions—first engage with the sport. Strengthening this pipeline requires expanding access to *entry-level wrestling centres*, integrating wrestling into school physical education programs, and improving the availability of safe, well-equipped community spaces. Creating more district-level and block-level competitions will allow girls to gain early exposure, motivation, and competitive experience. Additionally, federations and state governments must increase funding for local akharas and community academies, ensuring these receive mats, basic sports science support, and trained coaches, rather than relying solely on traditional methods. A robust pipeline also depends on early talent identification, through school leagues, Khelo India initiatives, and scouting programmes at under-14 and under-17 levels. Such reforms would

ensure that promising girls from both athletic and non-athletic families can enter structured training without financial or social barriers.

ii. *Professionalising Coaching and Sports Science*

Professionalising coaching is one of the most critical strategic interventions needed for the future. India must increase the number of certified female coaches, as research and experience show that women athletes often feel more secure, understood, and encouraged when guided by female mentors. This requires targeted scholarships for women coaches, leadership programmes, and coaching certifications through SAI, NIS Patiala, and state academies. Simultaneously, coaching for both men and women must shift from traditional technique-heavy approaches toward evidence-based, sports-science-driven training, integrating biomechanics, physiology, periodisation, mental conditioning, and injury-prevention practices.

India should expand strength and conditioning coaching, physiotherapy support, performance analysis, and nutrition expertise at the state and national levels. The establishment of regional high-performance centres—with mat surfaces, recovery rooms, scientific laboratories, load-monitoring tools, and video analytics—will help Indian women wrestlers compete with global standards. Professionalisation also includes upgrading coach education to include gender-sensitivity modules, athlete safeguarding, and ethical coaching frameworks, ensuring that training environments become safe, modern, and athlete-centred.

iii. *Enhancing Safety, Governance, and Athlete Welfare*

Ensuring safety and welfare is a non-negotiable priority for the future of women's wrestling. Strengthening governance mechanisms within the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), state federations, and sports institutions is essential. This includes enforcing strict compliance with the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) Act, establishing independent grievance committees, creating confidential reporting systems, and guaranteeing protection for whistleblowers. Athlete representation—especially that of women—must be included in decision-making bodies to enhance transparency, fairness, and accountability.

Welfare must also extend beyond protection from harassment. Many women wrestlers struggle with challenges such as financial insecurity, inadequate insurance, poor medical access, and uncertainty about post-retirement careers. Governments and federations should develop holistic welfare policies that provide health insurance, pension schemes, education support, and career

counselling. Mental health services, including sports psychology sessions and stress-management workshops, should be made standard across national and state training centres. Strong governance and welfare structures will foster trust, reduce dropout rates, and ensure a safe and dignified sporting environment.

iv. *Increasing Access for Rural and Underprivileged Girls*

The future success of women's wrestling in India depends heavily on widening the base by improving access for rural, tribal, and underprivileged girls, who often lack facilities, exposure, and socio-cultural support. Interventions must address economic barriers by offering scholarships, travel allowances, equipment grants, and hostel facilities for talented athletes from low-income families. Awareness campaigns showcasing successful women wrestlers can help shift local mindsets and counter conservative gender norms. Initiatives such as mobile coaching units, community demonstration camps, and collaboration with government schools can introduce wrestling to new geographies where the sport has not traditionally been practised.

State governments should also integrate wrestling training with educational pathways, ensuring that girls do not have to choose between academics and athletics. For underprivileged athletes, partnerships with NGOs, self-help groups, and Panchayati Raj institutions can create supportive ecosystems that encourage parents to allow their daughters to participate in training. Ultimately, expanding access will diversify the talent pool, reduce regional imbalances, and ensure that the next generation of national and international medalists emerges from all corners of the country rather than a limited set of strongholds.

V. CONCLUSION

The evolution of women's wrestling in India reflects a profound socio-cultural transformation, where a sport once confined to male-dominated akharas has become an arena of empowerment, visibility, and national pride for women. Over the past two decades, women wrestlers have emerged from diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds, challenging long-entrenched gender norms and redefining expectations of physicality, strength, and sporting identity. Their rise has been supported by changing family attitudes, shifting community perceptions, and increased media attention as champions like Geeta Phogat, Vinesh Phogat, and Sakshi Malik moved onto global podiums. At the same time, the expansion of academies, the integration of sports science, and targeted government policies such as Khelo India and TOPS have strengthened talent

development pathways and enhanced competitive performance. These developments collectively illustrate a dynamic moment in Indian sport where structural reforms and individual aspiration intersect.

Yet, despite these advancements, women's wrestling continues to face significant obstacles that demand sustained intervention. Socio-cultural resistance persists in many regions, while financial and infrastructural gaps limit opportunities for aspiring athletes. Safety concerns—including harassment and weak governance—highlight the need for stronger institutional accountability. Ensuring equitable access for rural and underprivileged girls, professionalising coaching frameworks, and building gender-sensitive support systems remain critical priorities. The future of women's wrestling in India depends on deepening grassroots engagement, expanding state and national investment, and promoting an inclusive environment where talent can flourish without being hindered by gendered constraints. If these strategic interventions are implemented consistently, women's wrestling can continue to grow as a symbol of resilience, empowerment, and sporting excellence in India.

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